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## THE DIRECT TEACHING OF MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

The 'direct' process of modern foreign language teaching is as ancient as the human race. It always has been and always will be *the* method in all cases where the teacher's linguistic attainments are limited strictly to his own mother tongue. There it becomes by necessity the 'natural' process of imparting knowledge, and the *modus docendi*—again quite naturally—must consist in 'Vorsprechen' and 'Nachsprechen' with objectivation of the concepts wherever this is possible. And this was precisely the manner in which for example French was taught on German soil as early as the 12th century by the Hofmeister in the Ritterakademien and at the courts, and by the Sprachmeister in the homes of the burghers. The aim of the instruction in those days was of a purely practical nature, i. e. the acquisition of a speaking ability in the foreign tongue in the briefest possible time.

Not until towards the end of the 17th century did French become a regular study in a number of German secondary schools; for example, Stuttgart introduced it in the gymnasium in 1686, Gera in 1690, Erlangen 1696, Halle in 1698, etc. The introduction of French as a regular school subject created a large demand for teachers of this language. It became impossible to fill all the vacancies with French maitres. Besides, the majority of them, owing to their checkered political past on the one hand and lack of pedagogical training on the other hand were not acceptable to the German school authorities. Thus it became necessary to appoint to the teaching positions of French men trained in German universities. Only a few of these men, however, spoke the French language with any degree of fluency. It was natural, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup>Paper delivered before the Modern Language Association of the Eastern States and the Central West and South, April 15, 1916.

that they approached the subject from the philological point of view and through the medium of the mother tongue. In short, they applied the indirect grammar-translation method, the method by which Latin and Greek had been taught for many a year in the German secondary schools.

This method predominated in the German school system, roughly estimating for two centuries; i. e. from 1700 to 1900. Now it must not be conceived as if there were no differing opinions or no attempts at reform during the centuries of the dominance of the indirect method of language teaching. It may be asserted with perfect justification that some of the best pedagogical minds of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have vigorously protested against the prevalence of formalism in the teaching processes. We need to mention only the names of Luther, Ratichius, Comenius, and Basedow in this connection. The influence of these great teachers was, however, more or less of a local character, and their pedagogical doctrine was by no means universally accepted. In consequence, the formal side of language teaching remained a dominant factor up to the end of the nineteenth century.

The development of the various types of Realanstalten in Germany gave a new and powerful impetus to a reform in the linguistic discipline. The names of Heinrich Schliemann, Hermann Perthes, Count Pfeil, and Moritz Trautmann are closely linked with the new movement. But the crushing blow to the formalism in language instruction was delivered by the then Wiesbadener school teacher, Wilhelm Viëtor in 1882, through the publication of his memorable *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren*. The Reform received the official endorsement in 1890 at the so-called December Conference. The oral and written employment of the foreign language, according to the resolutions framed and passed at this conference, was to be placed in the foreground. Ten years later followed the acceptance (with slight modifications) of the twelve articles known as the 'Wendtsche Thesen' (at the Leipziger Neuphilologentag, June 6, 1900). The success of the Reform movement was from that time on practically assured, especially with reference to the Realanstalten; by no means, however, has the reform method been universally adopted in the German secondary school system.

As regards the term 'direct method' it is of a relatively recent date. The method advocated by the German reformers is at first alluded to as 'die Reformmethode', but more often as 'die neue' or 'die neuere Methode'. Thus Viëtor in 1893 speaks of 'Unsere neue Methode in Amerika'. The same designation is frequently used by Max Walter. Occasionally we find the terms 'analytic' and 'inductive' applied. Klinghardt in 1892 suggests the name 'imitative' method, which is favorably commented upon. As a strictly technical term for the new process of foreign language instruction the designation 'direct' method was universally adopted in France, after this method had been officially endorsed and prescribed by the minister of public education, Monsieur Georges Leygues, in his *Circulaire* of November 15, 1901. Commenting upon this decree René Talamon (Williams College) says: "La première fois que nous l'entendrons il tombera des lèvres mêmes du ministre de l'Instruction Publique. . . . Son nom de Directe lui vient de ce qu'elle prétend supprimer l'intermédiaire de la langue maternelle non seulement dans la classe, mais encore dans le cerveau même de l'élève: il faut qu'il la comprenne, qu'il la parle 'directement' sans traduire".<sup>1</sup> In this circular M. Leygues declares the chief aim of foreign language instruction to be the acquisition of a speaking knowledge of the languages and the method which would most effectively lead to this goal to be the oral method. The term oral method, however, becomes supplanted by the designation direct method, owing to the use of this term in the publications of Messrs. Schweitzer and Simonnot, whose successful application of this method induced the French ministry of education to prescribe its universal adoption in the secondary schools. Gradually the term direct method begins to take the place of the names 'die Reformmethode', 'die neue' or 'neuere' Methode also in Germany, especially in Frankfort on the Main. But while in France it has received official sanction and strict enforcement, the same cannot be said of German secondary schools. There we still find all kinds of gradations and modifications of this method, according to type of institutions and individual preferences of school authorities and teachers. It would seem, therefore, more logical and consistent with actual conditions, to

<sup>1</sup>René Talamon: *La Méthode Directe en France*. Publications of the New England Mod. Lang. Asso. Vol. I, 1908.

refer to the new method in Germany as the 'Reformmethode', (since that term is also frequently used by German educators), in distinction from the French 'la méthode directe'.

As has been stated already the 'natural method' as practiced in Germany by the Sprachmeister and Hofmeister approximately from the twelfth to the eighteenth century fell into disuse when the modern foreign languages became installed in German secondary schools as obligatory studies. In the United States the 'natural method' was brought into prominence some forty years ago by men like Heness, Kroeh, van Daell, Sauveur, Berlitz, etc. It proved quite successful with younger children, but failed utterly when tried out in the public schools, even in the hands of the ablest teachers. (The Berlitz method, by the way, met with a similar fate in Russia.) Thus it gradually fell into disrepute and all efforts to perpetuate it were strongly opposed by American educators. We need not wonder, therefore, that when in the 1890's the reform method found strong advocates in Germany, the American school men vigorously opposed its adoption in this country, mainly because they believed that 'die neue Methode' was simply the revival of the 'natural method'. Professor Grandgent in a letter to Viëtor (Nov. 18, 1893) expressed his fear that American educators would no doubt mistake the reform method to be the ill-fated 'natural' or 'conversational' method, and we all know from experience that this misconception has not altogether vanished even to-day.

The 'natural method' differs from the 'direct method' in three particular respects:

1. It lacks the phonetic basis.
2. In its first stages it makes no use of reading or writing, but deals with conversation pure and simple.
3. It postpones to a very late period statements of connected grammatical principles.

The essential features of the 'direct method', on the other hand, are:

1. Much attention is paid to pronunciation, practical phonetics being made use of wherever necessary.
2. Grammar is taught inductively, but systematically.
3. Free composition is largely substituted for translation into the foreign tongue.
4. Translation into the mother tongue is reduced to a minimum.
5. Reading forms the center of instruction and especial care is taken in the selection of the reading material; it must be national

in its character, i. e. it must serve to acquaint the pupil with the intellectual and soul life of the foreign nation.

The 'reform method' as it is largely practiced in Germany (except such direct method centers as Frankfort or schools in which the Frankfort system has been adopted with only slight modifications) deviates from the 'direct method' by allowing a more extensive use of the mother tongue in the class-room, especially in grammar work, which is done both analytically and synthetically, and by recognizing a moderate amount of translation from and into the mother tongue as a wholesome and necessary exercise, especially in the case of English where the amount of time available is considerably less than in the case of French.

You are, of course, all aware of the fact that there is no consensus of opinion among modern foreign language teachers in this country, either with regard to the aims or concerning the method of instruction. The best that can be said of the present tendencies is that two phases of teaching are becoming gradually recognized as absolutely essential in all modern foreign language work, if it is to be carried on with any assurance of success; namely:

1. Stressing of correct pronunciation
2. Use of connected reading material in place of isolated sentences as a basis for work in grammar in the initial stages of instruction.

And since there is no consensus of opinion, I feel justified in submitting to you briefly my own convictions regarding the methodological phases of foreign language teaching in our school system. I believe:

1. That the place of the Natural Method is in the grades with children who begin the study of a foreign language at an early age (eight or nine years), except that reading and writing can be safely introduced much earlier than is generally advocated by the adherents of the 'naturalistic' school. To teach by this method in a high school would mean a waste of time and energy.

2. The Direct Method as it is applied in France presupposes a course extending over a period of at least six years. This method can be applied most effectively in the so-called 'Junior High Schools'. We are using it with very gratifying results in the six-year course of our university demonstration school at Wisconsin. It is feasible, however, also in a four-year high school course, provided the instructor is able to discriminate between the more essential and the less essential features of this method.

3. In high schools where the foreign language course comprises less than four years, the Reform Method, with considerable allowances for the use of the mother tongue in the class-room, is the only sane and effective method to use, and the amount of the vernacular should increase, particularly in grammar work, the shorter the course and the older the student.

4. In schools and classes where the chief aim is to give the learner a speaking ability, the use of the Direct Method is not only logical but imperative. The Grammar-Translation Method, with some slight modifications in the sense of the Reform Method, on the other hand, should be used with students who wish to become nimble and exact translators within a comparatively short time (say two years). Its proper place is in the so-called technical college courses, where the ability to translate is distinctly placed in the foreground.

The 'Direct Methodists' in the various parts and sections of our continent are daily waxing more arduous in their adoration of this, their golden calf. As in the days of Tetzels, the promise is being held out that

"Sobald die direkte Methode erklingt,  
Die Seele in den Himmel springt"

And yet there are very, very few schools indeed in which the instruction in modern foreign languages is really conducted in strict accordance with the principles of this method. Even those of our colleagues who would have us consider them as the originators of the Direct Method are in more than one respect violating some of the basic principles of that method. The fact that a teacher lays considerable stress on correct pronunciation, making occasional use of phonetic helps, or that he does considerable oral work in the foreign language in connection with the reading lesson is by no means an indication that he is following the Direct Method; he is simply using some of the devices of that method. In schools where the Direct Method is used, we find upon investigation that the classes are usually composed of pupils who either have had German in the upper grades or else possess some natural speaking knowledge of the language because of their German extraction. Such schools and classes, however, are not typical of the general conditions in our country, but rather the vast number of high schools in which the course comprises only two years and where the classes are composed largely of pupils who enter without any or only a slight knowledge of the foreign language. In Wisconsin

these high schools constitute about 68 per cent. of the entire number of accredited schools. In other states conditions are similar. Now, what can be accomplished in such institutions in such a brief period of time? Comparatively little. We can teach the pupils a fairly decent pronunciation, cover the most essential principles of German grammar, read in all about 200 pages of easy German, acquire some 1200 to 1500 words of active vocabulary, memorize a few poems, give the pupils a number of talks (in English) on Germany and the Germans, and the possibilities of our 'Kulturarbeit' are exhausted. The oral work in connection with the reading lessons, as well as the drill on grammatical forms, can and should, of course, be conducted in German; not with the prime object of giving the pupil a speaking knowledge but to insure correct pronunciation and to facilitate the fixing of vocabulary and of grammatical forms; but we can not afford to teach technical grammar in the foreign language, nor can we possibly employ texts with a German-German vocabulary as the tenets of the Direct Method would demand. In short, the Direct Method without considerable modifications has no place in a two-year course in German with pupils of non-German parentage; *with* such modifications as would make it a workable scheme it *is* no longer the Direct Method, but rather the Reform Method—and the sooner this point is cleared up the less room will there be left for misconceptions and self-deceit.

To teach a class by the Direct Method requires a well equipped, resourceful and live teacher. The number of such teachers is very limited indeed. But even the Reform Method presupposes better prepared teachers and better edited texts than we possess at the present time.

You are, no doubt, all familiar with Professor Hohlfeld's preliminary report on the collegiate training of teachers of modern foreign languages. You will recall that there is practically a general agreement among the American educators to the effect that graduation from a four-year collegiate course or an equivalent is indispensable for candidates preparing to teach in a secondary school. A considerable number of correspondents would require one year's graduate work in addition. From this same report it is evident that the second imperative need is the reorganization of the so-called teachers' courses in our colleges and universities.



How such a reorganization is to be brought about has been ably discussed by Mr. Weigel of the University of Chicago in his paper on 'The Reorganization of Teachers' Training in German in our Colleges and Universities'. (*Monatshefte*, Vol. XVII, Nos. 1-2, 1916). My own article on 'The Teachers' Course in German with Special Reference to Phonetics' (*Monatshefte*, Vol. XVI, No. 4, 1915) also deals with this problem.

Given a fairly well prepared teacher, the next question in secondary teaching demanding our attention is that of suitable and properly edited texts. The irrational practice of publishing texts, which are to meet the needs of both the college and the secondary school, should be discontinued. We must have grammars expressly intended for high school pupils. It would be very desirable to issue a *series* of such Lehrbücher, a separate volume for each year, containing just enough material for a year's work and well graded with regard to the reading lessons. Also a better edited series of the standard classical authors. The grammatical exercises in each text should be so arranged as not to overlap and repeat more than necessary the work of the previous years. For the present the self-styled Direct Method Texts show more debit than credit on this score.

Aside from texts intended for classroom work there is a need of texts so edited as to serve the purposes of outside reading. It is self-evident that the apparatus accompanying these texts must differ considerably from that used in the class room.

It would also seem very desirable that at least within each state a definite and fixed list of high school texts for courses in foreign languages be agreed upon. Such a 'Lesekanon', while leaving room for individual preferences, ought not be too extensive and ought to comprise only material of real pedagogical and cultural worth, excluding everything trivial and lachrymously sentimental, such as the crude and shallow products of a Marlitt, Werner, Heimbürg, and the like. The Wisconsin Association of Modern Language Teachers has this matter under consideration. The problem might be very profitably taken up by this Association; it would then have a greater weight than if handled by the individual state associations. Every three or four years the 'Lesekanon' would be revised and brought up to date. The necessity for such a 'Lesekanon' is a real one; whoever may be inclined to doubt it,

need only to ask the novice in the profession or the high school inspector.

Another enterprise which ought to receive our consideration in the near future is the establishment—in the larger educational centers—of institutes for experimental work in the field of foreign language study.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of such an institute would be to investigate on a large scale the various problems of foreign language work by conducting definite experiments in the affiliated schools, to test the value and applicability of the various educational theories, and thus to place the teaching of foreign languages on a solid scientific basis.

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<sup>1</sup>The organization and distribution of work in such 'experimental stations' might be well modeled after the Leipziger Institut für experimentelle Pädagogik. This Institut was founded in 1906 with a membership of 47 teachers. In 1911 (the latest report to which I had access) the organization comprised 182 active and 78 passive members, 50 of these being teachers' associations, chiefly in the kingdom of Saxony.

